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Student death may be 2nd linked to drinking

Some question whether Wabash College needs more alcohol education

*By Heather Gillers, Francesca Jarosz and Dan McFeely
heather.gillers@indystar.com*

The Wabash College student who died over the weekend appears to be the second freshman in a year to die in alcohol-related incidents during his first semester on campus.

Crawfordsville police are investigating whether alcohol was involved in the death of 18-year-old Johnny Smith, who was found dead at his Delta Tau Delta fraternity house Sunday morning.

Smith's relatives in Tucson, Ariz., said the aspiring engineer felt pressure from other fraternity members to drink. Relatives said they think he drank too much during homecoming festivities before his fraternity brothers put him to bed.

Smith's death follows an incident in October 2007 when freshman Patrick Woehner, 19, died after falling off the roof of a campus building. Montgomery County Coroner Darren Forman said alcohol was a contributing factor.

Now, students and administrators at the all-male college are questioning whether enough is done to teach freshmen about the dangers of alcohol. Unlike the state's major public universities and some other small private colleges, 900-student Wabash does not dedicate part of its new student orientation to the topic.

Instead, it relies on a code that calls on students to be gentlemen and responsible citizens.

The school administration has been "very intentional about our expectations" with regard to underage drinking, said Mike Raters, the college's dean of students, but he acknowledged that more could be done.

"Obviously our work needs to continue in our efforts to raise awareness of the gentleman's rule and responsible citizenry," he said. Raters questioned whether teaching students about the hazards of alcohol when they are too young to drink legally was the right thing to do.

"We don't have a specific session in orientation that focuses on alcohol education because the overall premise of the gentleman's rule and responsible citizenry emphasizes that they have to follow the law," he said. "To have a special session on alcohol education would be in my mind contradictory to 'follow the law.' "

Alcohol education and the signs of alcohol poisoning are discussed during a twice-a-year workshop attended by fraternity leaders. Raters said the subject also sometimes comes up in weekly meetings involving college staff members, fraternity presidents and resident assistants.

Students cite traditions

Some students say Wabash is not immune to the underage drinking that takes place on other campuses. Traditions such as homecoming are an excuse for some students to drink excessively, said

Spencer Elliott, a Wabash junior from Fort Wayne.

"Just like any football game -- like (Indiana) versus Purdue -- people go to the game drunk. Wabash is no different," Elliott said. "People take these events as an occasion to party and get drunk."

Wabash College President Patrick White said that in the two years he has been president of the school, he has never heard of a fraternity being disciplined for an alcohol-related incident, but some individuals have been disciplined for underage drinking.

Detectives told Smith's family that he had been at a homecoming party Saturday night and that four fraternity brothers brought him back to his room very drunk, Smith's aunt Sherri Taylor said Monday. She said they were told that a member of the fraternity stayed with Smith until about 4 a.m. Crawfordsville police said a 911 call from the frat house came in at 8:52 a.m. Sunday.

Relatives said Smith never drank alcohol growing up and had told his 19-year-old cousin Eddie Brown by phone last weekend that he felt pressure to drink to avoid humiliation in front of his fraternity brothers. "He never was in any kind of trouble," said Monya Ballah, Smith's grandmother.

Other schools have acted

Other schools have cracked down on hard-drinking fraternities and implemented curriculums aimed at preventing underage drinking.

Purdue University, for instance, provides a program that addresses alcohol for all students attending its five-day orientation, said Tammy Lowe, who oversees an initiative aimed at reducing high-risk drinking among first-year students.

At DePauw University, an alcohol task force with representatives from various campus departments works to be sure proper attention is focused on alcohol education.

Some students at Wabash say the school's administration tries to let students regulate their own lives, and alcohol awareness training is no different.

"They leave the responsibility in the hands of each and every student," said Jake Peacock, a Wabash freshman from Crawfordsville. "It's up to us to make sure that stuff gets done."

But advocates such as Ruth Gassman say more aggressive measures are needed. Gassman is executive director of the Indiana Prevention Resource Center at IU in Bloomington, which works to help prevent alcohol and drug problems.

She suggests measures such as requiring programs about drinking alcohol, providing alcohol-free and drug-free venues for students, and reducing advertising and promotion of alcoholic beverages on campus.

Elliott agreed that more should be done. He said that, ideally, the momentum should come from students rather than administrators.

"There are some things that need to be addressed," Elliott said. "This may be the impetus for some of that to begin."
